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Doctor Death: From Moreau to Mengele

Servatius declared the accused innocent of charges bearing on his responsibility for the "collection of skeletons, sterilizations, killings by gas, and similar medical matters," whereupon Judge Halevi interrupted him: "Dr. Servatius, I assume you made a slip of the tongue when you said that killing by gas was a medical matter." To which Servatius replied: "It was indeed a medical matter, since it was prepared by physicians; it was a matter of killing, and killing, too, is a medical matter."

—HANNAH ARENDT, Eichmann in Jerusalem

THE ORIGIN OF THE SUBLIME SPECIES

The last chapter ended with the New Man’s demise. I want to start this one with his birth.

The rationale for this inverted order lies in the taxonomy of the violent subject that frames this book. The dystopias I discussed in the last chapter dramatized the clash between the subject of discipline and the subject of ideology. But the subject of ideology, in fact, appeared in them as a defining absence rather than a definitive presence: the melodramatic but improbable O’Brien; the brooding but invisible Fuhrer; the mad but cunningly elusive Stalin Junior. March, a peculiar hybrid between a disciplined detective and a heroic New Man, is interesting only by virtue of the narrative aporia he incarnates. It almost seems that in order to meet the subject of discipline in his pure form we will have to resurrect dead narratives: the Freikorps writings, as Klaus Theweleit did so brilliantly in Male Fantasies, or the Soviet utopias, which are still waiting for their explorer.

However, my focus is genealogical (in the Foucauldian sense, as the history of the present) rather than archeological. The New Man is still present in
postmodern culture in two modalities: as an image of the future and a memory of the past. In the following chapter I will discuss the commemoration of the New Man’s atrocities. In this chapter I will analyze the way in which the Nazi Übermensch survives through a scientific— and science-fictional— narrative of transcendence that has its roots in nineteenth-century biology. Despite the trauma of World War II, the New Man has been defeated politically, economically, and ideologically but not narratively. I will trace the career of Doctor Death, the New Man as a force of natural selection, from his appearance in a fin de siècle science fiction novel to his present-day persistence as a stubborn ghost of a past menace and a future threat.

The rhetoric of Nazism and its ideological forerunners and fellow travelers are marked by an explicit, sometimes almost obsessive, emphasis on the body. The physical body becomes a target of massive ideological intervention, as a result of which “a new man will once again emerge in Europe, half from mutation and half from breeding: the German man,” claims writer Gottfried Benn; “the Revolution which is taking place in Europe is total because it is the revolution of the body,” says Drieu La Rochelle.

Martin Heidegger provided a respectable philosophical genealogy for the emerging Übermensch in the writings of Nietzsche and indicated his link to modern science and technology. However, the nature of this link has often been interpreted far too broadly, as in the vague discussions of “instrumental rationality.” Of course, the genesis, identity, and evolution of the New Man constitute a complex and intricate tangle of political, cultural, and scientific developments. A comprehensive narrative of his origin would have to include the radicalization of political discourse beginning in the 1890s, the shattering impact of World War I on the generation of the trenches, the changing images of gender. But there is one aspect of the New Man’s ideologies that, until recently, was ignored altogether and even now is mostly explored by historians of science rather than by cultural scholars. This is the connection between the New Man and the fin de siècle discourses of biology. Political scientists and historians of ideas recognize the importance of the Darwinian revolution in the genesis of fascism and Nazism. Gotz Aly and his collaborators, for example, claim that Nazism as a whole was an attempt to find “a biological solution to a social problem” (Aly 1). Muller-Hill, Lifton, and Lerner chart the social policies based on what Muller-Hill, a practicing biologist himself, called “a murderous science.” However, while meticulously documented, their studies often give little attention to the crucial question of how, exactly, the massive shift in the perception of Nature occasioned by Darwin’s theory shaped the utopian subjectivity of the New Man. How were this new body, with its impossible perfection, and this new soul, with its dedication to violence, generated by the sober discourse of science?
Literature is wiser than culture studies. Among the more compelling—and persistent—symbols of Nazism today is Doctor Death, a ruthless surgeon, a monster-maker who indiscriminately destroys and creates life. This icon, often related to the real-life Auschwitz physician Josef Mengele, is found in anguished investigations of the Holocaust, such as Rolf Hochhuth’s play The Deputy (1964); in meditations on the psychology and philosophy of Nazism, such as Jorge Luis Borges’s “Deutsches Requiem”; and in thrillers with Nazi “bad guys,” such as Ira Levin’s The Boys from Brazil (1976).

It is through this figure that I want to investigate the evolution of the New Man. This investigation will eventually focus on two key texts: Lucius Shepard’s short story “Mengele” (1986) and H. G. Wells’s novel The Island of Dr. Moreau (1896). The texts are very similar: Shepard’s story, in fact, is a condensed rewriting of its famous predecessor. Both describe the arrival of the first-person narrator in an enclave ruled over by a ruthless and enigmatic surgeon who deliberately inflicts terrible pain upon his experimental subjects. The results of his scientific torture are suffering and malformed monsters who worship their creator as God. Moreau is eventually killed, but the Beast-Folk persist in his cult; Mengele is unharmed. The narrators in both texts succumb, with different degrees of conviction, to the philosophy expounded by Doctor Death. But while the historical origins of Shepard’s story are sufficiently explained by its title, the prolepsis of Wells’s novel is far more puzzling. What is Doctor Death doing in a novel written fifty years before his appearance on the world stage? And in picking Wells’s novel as a model for his own parable of Nazism, is Shepard evading the issue or confronting it?

I will argue that the intertextual continuity between Moreau and Mengele, the continuity apparent in almost every fictional text dealing with the butcher surgeon of Auschwitz, indicates more than just postmodern recycling of plots. It outlines the ideological continuity between Nazism and fin de siècle bio-ideologies reflected in Wells’s great novel. The transformation of Dr. Moreau into Dr. Mengele parallels the development of the New Man from an aesthetic possibility to a political goal.

The aesthetics of the New Man are predicated on transformation of atrocity into sublime harmony since all the holocausts of totalitarianism “have always been perpetrated in the name of man as harmonious being, of a New Man without antagonistic tension” (Zizek 5). But the specific articulation of this harmony in Nazism is not simply a refurbished version of the Platonic vision of the subject as the microcosm of the ideal body politic that I have outlined in the last chapter. In addition to his remote Platonic descent, the Nazi New Man has a more immediate ancestor: a cluster of fin de siècle discourses of corporeality and subjectivity. This cluster, composed of the bio-ideologies of Social Darwinism and eugenics, generates what I will call “the biological
sublime,” a particular modality of the violent sublime that combines the ecstasy of murder with the instrumental rationality of science.

At the core of the biological sublime lies the creation of the New Man through imaginary self-identification with Nature’s law of pain and suffering. The biological sublime is based on a deliberate manipulation of the experience of the new order of Nature, revealed by Darwinian theory for the ideological purpose of constructing the selfhood of New Man. Darwinism generated an influx of the sublime into culture. This influx had two aspects, corresponding to Kant’s distinction between mathematical and dynamic sublime. By opening up the abyss of deep geological time, Darwinism created that vertiginous effect of infinity, which, for Burke, is the “truest test of the sublime” (87). But within these deep vistas of evolution, nature was suddenly perceived as far from serene. Rather, it was seething with pain, “red in tooth and claw,” blindly inflicting suffering and death on innumerable living creatures. This infinite abattoir was the sublime of a different order, evoked by “the irresistibility of nature’s might [that] makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our impotence” (Kant 121). But if for Kant the counterbalance to this impotence is to be sought in the mind’s inner resources, for the discourse of Social Darwinism and eugenics, the escape from human helplessness and terror lies in identifying with Nature’s sublime might. The eugenic New Man seeks “to take over the functions of nature” (Lifton 17).

One of the Nazi goals was to produce what Hitler called “that supreme good: a race created according to the rules of eugenics” (Burrin 26). But despite some sporadic attempts to breed supermen, Nazi science was not up to the actual creation of a new species. Nor was this its real aim. Rather, what was achieved by Nazi biology was an ideological transformation of the existing subject. Its accomplishment was the new sublime body of the elite living in what Lifton calls “the continuous ‘high state’” (474), always tottering on the verge of ecstatic self-dissolution and yet mastering this dissolution by an act of will. The experience of the sublime was domesticated for ideological purposes and “transcendence, like everything else, became biologized” (Lifton 475).

The biological sublime is an attempt to harness the sweeping changes inaugurated by evolutionary biology to a particular modality of subjectivity. Thus, it becomes part of what might be called the “politics of humanity,” by analogy with the politics of class or gender. Defining humanity in opposition to various other entities—primarily animals on the one hand and machines on the other—has been one of the central concerns of Western culture since antiquity. In the “General Introduction” to the volume The Boundaries of Humanity, Morton Sosna points out that there is a long history of “repeated attempts to reduce the human to a single a priori concept, to uncover linkages between moral and natural orders (or disorders), and to create allegories that legitimize...
a given culture's most cherished beliefs" (3). But Darwinism has thrown a monkey wrench into all such attempts by proving, with a certainty that could be resisted but not seriously contested, that humans are animals. It has substituted a narrative of continuity for the allegories of contrast or opposition.

In the wake of the cultural cataclysm that was The Origin of Species (1859), the question of the nature of human subjectivity was raised with a new urgency and couched in a new idiom. It is arguable that both Nietzsche and Freud are Darwin's offspring. Without the metaphor of fossils, of the past shaping the present and persisting in the form of enigmatic traces and calcified clues, there would have been no psychoanalysis. Without the new, and often anguished, questioning of Nature there would have been no Übermensch.

The shattering impact of Darwinism is often mistakenly related to the notion of evolution. But, in fact, there was nothing new in this notion. Charles Darwin had been preceded by Erasmus Darwin, Lamarck, Robert Chamber, and many others who had argued for the mutability of the species. Rather it was Darwin's proposed mechanism of evolution, natural selection, that created the foundation for the "transvaluation of values" and eventually, in a paradoxical backlash, gave birth to the New Man.

Instead of the teleological "ladder of progress" leading up to humanity as the pinnacle of the orderly evolutionary process, natural selection projected an open-ended narrative of accident, randomness, and contingency. Darwinian evolution is neither inherently teleological nor progressive, and its main mechanism, natural selection, is cruel and wasteful. There were few nineteenth-century thinkers, excluding Darwin himself and his disciple, T. H. Huxley, who were willing to face squarely the implications of this concept. Neo-Lamarckism, the misnamed Social Darwinism and eventually eugenics, were ways of avoiding the vertigo of the suddenly contingent world. While many biologists attempted to find ways to reintroduce teleology into evolution, philosophers and ideologues sought to conquer Nature by identifying with it.

The New Man incorporates Darwinism's dizzying denial of essential humanness, while at the same time neutralizing its potentially anarchic emphasis on randomness, heterogeneity, and accident. The language of eugenics denies fragmentation, loss, and separation as the necessary foundation of selfhood. This imaginary plenitude, however, is achieved by going back to the bloody Eden of violent, indifferent, amoral Nature. Holding all oppositions in impossible balance, the sublime biological subject transcends the human condition and aligns himself not with the flawed law of the Symbolic but with the ineffable law of Nature: "The sublime is the anti-social condition of all sociality, the infinitely unrepresentable which spurs us on to yet finer representations, the lawless masculine force which violates yet perpetually renews the feminine enclosure of beauty" (Eagleton 54).
The aesthetic paradox is subsumed in the New Man’s seamless subjectivity. Produced by disruptive violence, it is nevertheless fully social; transcending representation, it is caught in a web of images and words; aggressively masculine, it “renews” femininity by raping it. And most importantly, while created by scientific manipulation, it assumes the mantle of “naturalness.” The eugenic New Man is a technological monster who claims to be a prelapsarian Adam.

In order to understand how Darwinism becomes implicated in this ideological fantasy, we have to uncover the hidden aesthetics of science, the nexus where rational theories tangle with the irrationality of desire and where representations of Nature are infected with the unrepresentability of violence. In the next sections I will show how the sublime biology of the New Man rests on the foundation of the biological sublime.

The Empire of Doctor Death

“National Socialism is nothing but applied biology,” said Rudolf Hess, Hitler’s deputy. In Robert Jay Lifton’s formulation, the Third Reich was a “biocracy” (17). Lifton, Robert Proctor, Richard Lerner, Bruno Muller-Hill, Gotz Aly, and others have dispelled the image of Nazism as mindless, anti-science, and irrational and have shown that the Nazi revolution was based on what the Nazis “considered sound biology and medicine” (Proctor 7).

Nazi biology was not a specifically German phenomenon. Eugenics was a science with international appeal whose influence on the scientific agenda and the social policies in Europe and the United States was enormous in the decades preceding World War II. The father of the New Man is the eugenic perfect Child: “A perfect Child is the symbol of evolution; he represents the highest Nature has produced up to our time—the hope of Man and of God. We must live for him, sacrifice all for him; shape our lives for his benefit; for in this we shall live for the future welfare of mankind—the goal of Evolution” (Armstrong 116).

Thus writes eugenicist Charles Wicksteed Armstrong in his book published in England in 1927, while Hitler in Mein Kampf, a couple of years earlier, exhorts his countrymen to sacrifice everything in order to “safeguard the existence and reproduction of our race and our people, the sustenance of our children and the purity of our blood” (214). It is not likely that either of these authors was aware of the existence of the other. But in analyzing ideologies, parallels are more important than straightforward appropriations. Martin Pernick points out that the parallels between eugenicist discourses outside Germany and Nazism “do not depend for their significance on direct links of intellectual ancestry. Rather, the similarities are important because they
illuminate how Nazism built upon internationally shared eugenic concepts and images” (167).

Nor would it be possible to draw a clear line between science and pseudo-science in unraveling the spider web of deadly rhetoric that almost strangled Europe. Mario Biagioli argues that the horrors of Nazi concentration camp experiments were “a form of science rather than its aberration” (186). Historically contingent, the boundaries of science are shifting and uncertain: racial hygiene blurs into eugenics that blurs into the legitimate study of heredity; the torture chamber may double as a laboratory; Doctor Death may anxiously work on his postdoctoral project (as Mengele, in fact, did during his service in Auschwitz). It is tempting for contemporary biology to treat Nazism as a tragic accident, an inexplicable swerve from the normal, perfunctorily regretted and easily forgotten. Such a gesture ostensibly preserves the purity of scientific endeavor from the contamination of politics. But history is not a disease that can be warded off by intellectual quarantine. And the history of Nazi ideology amply demonstrates the link between evolutionary science and genocide.

Eugenics, the science of human breeding, had two aspects, positive and negative, the first attempting to increase what it saw as the genetically superior part of the population, the second to eliminate the “unfit.” The latter included both social rejects and inferior races: in accordance with its profoundly deterministic, hereditary view of human nature, eugenics regarded any kind of social deviance (including simple poverty) as a biological flaw. In official proclamations of eugenicists, positive eugenics was seen as paramount, while negative eugenics, whether in the shape of sterilization or extermination (which was being advocated as early as 1900), was often apologetically shrugged off as a regrettable necessity. However, in the actual policy of Nazi Germany the goals were reversed: while there were some halfhearted attempts to increase fertility and stimulate the reproduction of “true Aryans,” all of the state’s power became invested in the projects of negative eugenics, first as the euthanasia program and then as die Endlösung.

The death camp and the medical experiments performed there constitute one of the most horrifying chapters in what Steven Bruhm calls “the history of pain.” As I have argued above, pain, whether experienced or witnessed, “materializes” the body. Narrativized, pain becomes a “culturally mediated experience through which authors and characters come to ‘know,’ in some sense, their own bodies” (Bruhm xx). But the medical torture practiced by the Nazi physicians went beyond the knowledge of the body; it became a ritualized praxis of self-transformation.

There is something so chilling in the mere catalogue of the senseless but meticulously documented surgeries, mutilations, and baroque executions performed in Mengele’s laboratory that one can understand Rolf Hochhuth’s
image of him as “H is Satanic Majesty.” In his play The Deputy, the evil of Nazism is represented by the sinister Doctor, explicitly modeled upon Mengele. In his notes to the play, Hochhuth seriously claims for the Doctor a superhuman, demonic status: Mengele has “the stature of Absolute Evil, far more unequivocally . . . than Hitler” (31–32). Hochhuth is taken to task by various critics for regarding a murderer as a supernatural force of evil. However, are the alternative labels “gangster” or “thug” any more illuminating? Despite Bertold Brecht’s attempt to cut the Nazi Übermenschen down to size by treating them as criminals, it seems impossible to relate to “the Angel of Death from Auschwitz” as if he were mere flesh and blood. Robert Lifton attempts to juxtapose the “real” Mengele—son, husband, and father, a good-looking scion of a Bavarian family that made their money by producing agricultural tools—with the Doctor Death of the legend. But he has to admit that many Auschwitz inmates who knew the real man all too well also perceived him as “a nonhuman evil force” (345). In order to account for his aura, Lifton suggests that Mengele was an incarnation of the ideology that built Auschwitz; that his harmony with this factory of pain “rendered him unique into himself, sui generis” and at the same time representative of Nazism as such (346). There is, in other words, no hidden human truth to be discovered by dissociating Dr. Josef Mengele from Doctor Death: the two are the same.

The source of Mengele’s fascination is the combination of limitless cruelty and scientific rationality. As opposed to the serial killers I discussed in chapter 2, his selfhood was not ruined by the raw impact of the violent sublime. Mengele never suffered as much as a nervous breakdown; for thirty years after the war he remained steadfast in his convictions. Ted Bundy, stammering through broken self-explanations, is a monster. Mengele, clean-shaven and industrious, cheerfully filling cardboard boxes with human eyes to be sent to his scientific patron in Berlin, is a dark angel, if not a dark God. In the words of a prison doctor who knew him well, Mengele indeed “wanted to be a God—to create a new race” (qtd. in Lifton 359).

His self-divinity is sought not simply in the brute power of knife and fist. This is a disciplined, productive transcendence— “to create a new race.” But even Mengele himself should have realized that his “experiments,” such as injecting brown eyes with a blue dye to create a more “Aryan” appearance, were worthless. The science of the death camp is simultaneously more disciplined than ordinary scientific research—Mengele’s inmate assistants were executed for a single mistake in copying anthropometric data—and epistemologically futile. It is not a question of morality, such as is ordinarily asked in the discussions of the “limits of science,” but of simple utility. Stem cell research might appear morally problematic to some, but there is no question that it works. There was not a single significant discovery coming from
Auschwitz and even the raw data that were collected could have easily been obtained without torture. It seems that Hochhuth is right when he insists that suffering is not a by-product of the Doctor's research but its goal, as his character gleefully proclaims:

I'm already doing enough
   to perpetuate racially pure humanity.
   I cremate life,
   I create life—
   and always I create suffering. (237)

Pain, not knowledge, was being sought in endlessly repeated and endlessly elaborated rituals of scientific murder. Representations of Mengele emphasize this “sadistic” aspect of Doctor Death: in Shepard’s “Mengele,” for example, the narrator says: “I had not understood what scientific purpose could have been served by this sort of mutilation” (278). The same production of pain is the dominant feature of Wells’s Dr. Moreau. Moreau, ostensibly aiming at the creation of supermen, ends up producing pitiful monsters whose only function is to suffer. It is not a “mistake,” as with Frankenstein, who does not realize what an ugly and unfit creature he has made until it is too late. Both Moreau and Mengele want to create pain through unnecessary and mutilating surgery.

It is easy to imagine Doctor Death as a B-grade movie’s “mad scientist”: disheveled hair, jury-rigged electric installations, eyes glazed with lust for power. This image is a great relief. Priest Riccardo in The Deputy hopefully asks the Doctor: “Are you only a lunatic?” (247), and Rosalynn Haynes assimilates all murderers with a Ph.D. into the stereotype of the “mad, bad scientist.” However, Hochhuth’s Doctor does not even deign to answer the priest, while Moreau brushes off the imputations of both madness and evil, eventually managing to convince the novel’s narrator that his project is both rational and right. And if we understand the nature of this project, we might be tempted—hopefully, not for long—to assent. For Doctor Death is indeed logical, consistent, and very far from either the confusion of madness or the vaguely sexual pleasures of sadism. He does want to create a “new race,” though not with the inadequate tools of test tubes and genetic charts. Technology is limited; but Doctor Death harnesses the power of science as ideology. The sublime subject, the New Man that he wants to create, is himself.

In attempting to come to terms with Mengele’s astounding cruelty, Lifton emphasizes the role of ideological investment in the formation of the self: “none of Mengele’s behaviours—least of all his capacity to inflict pain and feel nothing for victims—can be understood separately from his involvement in
ideology” (377). This is the ideology that utilizes the violent sublime in order to produce a new subject. The anthropological transformation that Nazi “biocracy” strove to achieve was not so much physiological or genetic as psychological. Science, especially the science of biology, was the blueprint for a new psyche rather than for a new body. Whichever wondrous results eugenicists—and not only in Germany—promised in the future of scientifically regulated breeding, underlying their texts is the utopian urgency of becoming Nature’s highest form themselves, here and now.

Eugenics can be seen as a Foucauldian “technology of the self” rather than a technology of reproduction. The Nazi failed “revolution of the body” was a pretext for a revolution of the soul, which used atrocity for purposes of self-transformation according to Nature’s plan. The actual breeding of the blond blue-eyed superman was a chimera, but a species of the New Man did come into being in concentration camps:

believing Nazis saw themselves as “children of the gods,” empowered to destroy and kill on behalf of their higher calling, as men who claimed “spurious attributes of divinity.” All Nazis staked some claim to this transcendent state, but doctors could buttress their omnipotence with those bizarre and compelling claims made in the name of biology, evolution, and healing. The Auschwitz self could feel itself to be tapping the power source of nature itself in becoming the engine of the Nazi movement, or nature’s engine. (Lifton 449)

This “Auschwitz self” includes but transcends what Klaus Theweleit calls the “corporeal ego” of the fascist male: the image of the “man of steel,” locked in his invulnerable, rigid, insensitive body armor, “a man with machinelike periphery, whose interior has lost its meaning,” a man anesthetized to pain and desire (2, 162). As we shall see, immunity to pain is indeed an important prerequisite of Doctor Death. But it has to be supplemented with an ability to inflict pain on others: not just in the orgasmic violence of the battlefield but channeled into an elaborate, measured, highly structured activity, which builds up the violator’s divinity in the exact proportion to the abjection of his victims. Torture becomes both science and art. Foucault’s discussion of “scientia sexualis,” the transformation of sexuality into a field of knowledge, provides a model for the development of the science of violence, or rather of science as violence.

It is important to stress that genocide did have practical goals outside the self-deification of the killers. The ideological complex of “biology, evolution, and healing” involved the physical transformation of the body politic by cleansing it from the Jewish “pestilence” and encouraging the propagation of the biologically superior Aryans. But equally, and inseparably from this
physical task, it involved the psychical transformation of the elite into eidolons of divinity. By identifying with Nature, “a doctor playing God” becomes “the embodiment of a larger spiritual principle, the incarnation of a sacred Nazi deity” (Lifton 379). This deity is Nature. Nazism’s ideal subjects “owe their higher existence . . . to the knowledge and ruthless application of Nature’s stern and rigid laws,” says Mein Kampf (288).

There is still some unease experienced by many people when they try to reconcile the scientific ideology of Nazism with its delirium of violence. Mindless storm troopers, brutish brownshirts, sadomasochists in black uniforms—all those fit very well with the idea of the Third Reich as a barbarian horde. After the Eichmann trial, however, this was counterbalanced by the image of a vast bureaucratic machine presided over by little paper pushers, some of them in academic gowns. On the one hand, “one could argue that a corrupt and inherently distorted science lent Nazism a specifically ‘academic’ and ‘scientific’ character” (Burleigh and Whippermann 56). On the other hand, counters Dominick LaCapra, we should “at least entertain the possibility of a Nazi sublime that, in a fascination for radical transgression, complicated the desire for a ‘beautiful’ and rational totality that would exclude Jews” (1994, 95). It is precisely because “radical transgression” is seen in inherent opposition to the academic and the scientific that Doctor Death becomes such an enigmatic character. The solution to the enigma lies in the realization that the two are interconnected.

When radical transgression is repressed, the Holocaust perpetrators become dehumanized, depersonalized robots, bureaucrats of genocide, so blinded by “obedience to orders” that they saw no difference between corpses and office circulars. An unfortunate consequence of Hannah Arendt’s Eichmann in Jerusalem, with its catchphrase “the banality of evil,” this view has only recently been challenged by new historical studies. Even Tzvetan Todorov in his recent book Facing the Extreme, which attempts to present a more morally nuanced view of the universe of camps, still talks of the perpetrators in terms of “fragmentation” and “instrumental thinking” (177), as if they were somnambulists of murder, killing in a fit of absentmindedness. Obviously, this is the image of themselves the surviving perpetrators are eager to present, since it absolves them of responsibility. But what Todorov reads as the flat effect of psychic fragmentation in Rudolf Höss’s autobiography can also be read as the ecstatic intrusion of the sublime, which cannot be voiced, just as the ecstasy of a mystic cannot be voiced. The mystic appeals to his God to grant him the tongue of fire that can speak the ineffable. At the time Höss is writing, his god is dead.

It is not as bureaucrats but as “children of the gods” that the Nazi elite saw themselves. Doctor Death is “a god or, at least, a demigod” because “he is
master over flesh and spirit, life and death” (Amery 35–36). And this mastery comes not because the torturer cannot empathize with the pain of the tortured but precisely because he can. The victim, recovering from all but unbearable pain, but still alive, can say to himself: “I have experienced the ineffable” (Amery 38). The torturer can say: “I have made another person experience the ineffable on my behalf, I have the power to send a messenger over the border into the kingdom of death and to bring him back, and all with no harm done to myself.” He torturer becomes a vampire of transcendence.

Daniel Goldhagen’s Hitler’s Willing Executioners (1997), despite the criticism many historians leveled at it, had the advantage of emphasizing the agency of the perpetrators and arguing that they were not obedient automatons but willing and often eager torturers and murderers. However, Goldhagen’s explanation of this eagerness in terms of a specifically “virulent” character of German anti-Semitism suffers from an obvious flaw, which was not pointed out in the heated debates over the book. These debates centered on what was erroneously perceived as Goldhagen’s blanket accusation of the German nation as a “mad” people, a nation of serial killers and lust murderers. He replied he was talking about a special character of German culture and not about some immutable biological trait in German blood. But, in fact, the very terms of the debate, ideology or blood lust, nurture or nature, were inadequate to the issue at hand. Even assuming all the Holocaust perpetrators were passionate believers in Nazi ideology, this still does not address the phenomenological quandary of how a sane man could look at a child and see “vermin,” a “parasite,” shape-shifting alien, or whatever else the Jews were supposed to be. Goldhagen’s book fails in penetrating this transition from the “cognitive models” of an ideology to the actual carrying-out of atrocity. He explains how the moral and social prohibitions of murder were undermined by an ideology that offered a new “cognitive scheme.” But what about the instinctive reluctance to kill, especially to kill an unarmed defenseless creature at close quarters? That this reluctance existed in full force is testified by the fact that gassing was first tried because shooting took too heavy a psychological toll on the perpetrators.

Ideology was necessary as a narrative model that framed the perpetrators’ subjectivity in a socially acceptable way. But at the core of this self-narrative of the decent Volkish comrade lay the dark core of the violent sublime. The cognitive frame of scientific racism was the stepping-stone toward the plunge into the ineffableness of mass killing. Nazi science denied the humanity of the victim and yet covertly acknowledged it in its own incredible brutality.

If the torturer did not identify with the corporeality of his victim, there would be no “divinity” in transcending his own weakness. A member of SD Einsatzkommando, Felix Landau, describes in his diary his reactions to shooting...
naked women and children. He is surprised at his own fortitude; he claims to be “completely unmoved”; he is congratulating himself on his “toughening” into a perfect Party comrade. And yet at the same time his heart “beats faster” when he recalls having been in a similar situation to that of his victims: as a participant in the failed Austrian coup in 1934, he had to face “the machine-gun barrels” of the police. Now he can taste the sweetness of his own survival by vicariously experiencing the fear of his victims: “And here I am today, a survivor, standing in front of others in order to shoot them” (in Klee 96–97).

To sustain this murderous balancing act of identification and disavowal, the violator must perceive himself as justified and supported by a higher power. The heady experience of violence, in which his old self is battered and dissolved, is seen as communion with this power, as emergence into a higher state of being. Ideology supplies the perpetrator with a social narrative that allows him to integrate the high state of murderous exaltation with everyday functioning. The sublimity of violence eats through the old narratives of identity built on ethics and discipline. But at the same time, by “spurring on” the production of new modalities of representation, violence encourages new forms of selfhood that strive for murderous transcendence. Entering the social space, the pain of the victim gives birth to the sublime self of the murderer.

But this is not the inarticulate, socially mute self of the serial killer, whose sublimity is indistinguishable from unintelligibility. Because it is held together by the “skin” of a shared ideological narrative, the sublime self of the subject of ideology ultimately expands to identify with that very symbolic authority that underwrites its violence, be it God, history, or nature. And the more clear, logical, and incontrovertible this narrative appears, the greater its success in engendering such sublime subjects who combine dedication to slaughter with keen social skills.

The bio-ideology of Nazism is far more efficacious in incorporating the violent sublime than the comparatively utopian ideology of Stalinism. The two regimes shared the salient features of the ideal subject I outlined in the last chapter—identification with the body politic, self-worship, and disgust with democracy. However, they differed in the nature of the ultimate symbolic authority that underwrote their violent excesses. Consistent and scientific, Nazi racism could represent the victim as literally, not metaphorically, nonhuman. The Jews were aliens, not enemies, of the people. By reshaping the concept of Nature, Nazism could imbue its adherents with the belief that their violence was part of the natural pattern of existence, while empathy was degenerative and sick. Stalinism, which adulterated the initial Marxism with whatever additions took the leader’s fancy at any given moment, could never be as efficient in producing New Men as its rival. Precisely because Stalinism was a piecemeal, “weak” ideological construct, it never reached the heights of
Nazi baroque cruelty, even though it managed, in its own fitful way, to kill off more people. Moreover, the neo-Lamarckian emphasis on “nurture” was deeply ingrained in its master narrative, causing the notorious ban on genetics. Since the dividing line between the victim and the defied murderer could never be drawn with a biological precision, Stalinism did not have its equivalent of Doctor Death.

The Nazi collaboration between ideological rationality and the intoxication of the sublime is perfectly expressed in the infamous slogan at the entrance to Auschwitz, Arbeit Macht Frei, “Work makes you free.” Often seen as pure cynicism, it was apparently meant by its inventor, Rudolf Höss, “not as a mockery . . . [or] a false promise that those who worked to exhaustion would eventually be released, but rather as a kind of mystical declaration that self-sacrifice in the form of endless labor does in itself bring a kind of spiritual freedom” (Friedrich 2–3). Höss was a workaholic himself, and in the mystical identification with his victims, he promised them that their sacrifice would set him free. But this identification has to be constantly checked by the construction and reconstruction of difference, or the murderer will drown in the sublime, emerging from his baptism of blood as a monster rather than the Angel of Death. The mingled horror and intoxication of killing could get out of hand as attested by several documented cases of psychotic breakdowns among members of the Einsatzgruppen. So the perpetrators of genocide had to be reassured that their sublime bodies were different from the abject corporeality of the victims. Shaved, tattooed, starved, beaten, dressed in ridiculous uniforms, the victims were made to look as unlike their torturers as possible. Their abjection acted as a foil to the New Man’s “impermeable body” (Birum 25). Such a body was constructed through the immediate aesthetic contrast with the bleeding, messy, opened-up corporeality of his victims. This contrast was institutionalized in concentration camps. Looking scarcely human, the prisoners set off the neatly uniformed bodies of their masters that seemed to transcend physical wear and tear.

By identifying with the Law of Nature rather than with the merely human law of the Symbolic, Doctor Death positions himself beyond the judgment of words. However—and this is where the irony of Doctor Death’s cultural genealogy lies—his vision of Nature as a sublimely cruel force is founded on a culturally specific evolutionary narrative, which, moreover, is open to a very different interpretation from those imposed upon it by the “men of steel.”

THE NATURAL HISTORY OF PAIN

Nazi science is not a Nazi invention. There is nothing original or even specifically “German” about Mengede’s worldview. What distinguishes him from
his British, American, and French colleagues is the single-mindedness with which he and the racist state that he represented transformed the platitudes of eugenics and the utopian mood of the radical intelligentsia into a social fact. Nazi “sacred science” (Lifton 472) originates in what George Bernard Shaw calls “the religion of evolution,” the fin de siécle blending of biology and mysticism that took all of Europe by storm (1903, 151). Pernick cogently describes the process whereby “the scientific method [was viewed] as the foundation of a new objectively true religion, in which the laws of nature were truly morally binding ‘laws’; not neutral facts but ethical imperatives” (Pernick 98). And like any other religion, this new scientific dispensation had a mystical side, appealing to the desire for transcendence.

In this section we step back from Auschwitz and the historical Mengele to look at their ideological roots. The mold of subjectivity that Mengele filled with such chilling precision had been created long before he drew his first breath, and it persists, now indelibly stamped with his name, after his anonymous death by drowning. In order to understand how the “sacred science” of eugenics produced Doctor Death, we have to understand the two features that distinguished it from ordinary experimental pursuit of knowledge. First, it was indeed based on worship of Nature; second, this was a new post-Darwinian Nature, filled with pain and violence.

The collaboration between science and pursuit of transcendence is described by the famous British biologist J. B. S. Haldane in his 1924 essay “Daedalus” as the “substitution of the doctor for the priest,” whereby the “biological invention then tends to begin as a perversion and end as a ritual supported by unquestioned beliefs and prejudices” (49–54). Haldane might have had in mind the views of Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919), Germany’s most important Darwinist and the founder of the Monist League, whose ideology “combined an almost mystical, religious belief in the forces of nature (i.e., natural selection as the fundamental law of life) with a literal, if not analogical, transfer of the laws of biology to the social and political arena” (Lerner 24). And just a short time before Haldane’s essay, biologist Albert E. Wiggam published in America a best-selling volume, The New Decalogue of Science, which disseminated “the biological Golden Rule” and enlisted Jesus on the side of eugenics. Wiggam’s rhetoric, while extreme, is by no means atypical:

Yet the new dispensation is just as divine, as sacred, as inspired as the old. It is filled with warnings of wrath, both present and to come, for the biological ungodly, as well as with alluring promises for them who do His scientific will. These warnings should first make you TREMBLE; they should, secondly, make you PRAY; they should, thirdly, fill you with the militant faith of a new evangel. (22)
Nature as revealed by science becomes a new gospel, a guide to both private and public conduct. This is the bedrock of eugenics, which propagated its prescriptions for the biological regeneration of humanity with the fervor of prophecy rather than with the calmness of expert opinion, yet at the same time enlisted the authority of knowledge to shield itself from ethical criticism: “The revelation to which I refer... is Nature... wherever our ethical notions come into conflict with natural law it is our ethics that need correction, not natural law...” (Armstrong 99).

Nazism faithfully reproduced this duality of eugenics in its everyday ideological discourse. Martin Bormann, for example, in his secret instructions to the party’s district leaders, deflected Christian attacks on Nazi policies by blasting religious superstition and proudly claiming that “National Socialism... rests on a scientific foundation.” Yet, as he went on to explain, the natural law incarnated in the Third Reich was also invested with sacredness, precluding any blasphemous attempt to try it with the acid of “corrosive” Jewish reasoning: “The power of nature’s law... is what we call the omnipotent force, or God” (in Remak 103).

By the 1940s, this is a cliché. Already in 1872, Walter Bagehot formulated what later became the main doctrine of Social Darwinism and eugenics: the methods of Nature should be emulated in human society, “what was put forward for mere animal history may, with a change of form but an identical essence, be applied to human history” (43–44). And later on, with the traditional power structures in disarray, the fin de siècle fastens upon the “normative idea of Nature—Nature as a model of human existence” (Stern 48). However, this is Nature that has undergone profound transvaluation as a result of Darwinism.

In 1860 Darwin wrote to Asa Gray:

I own that I cannot see as plainly as others do, and as I should wish to do, evidence of design and beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of Caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice. (1993, 124)

The shocking (even to himself) impact of Darwin’s words can only be appreciated against the background of natural theology—a trend in early-nineteenth-century natural history that attempted to read God’s design in the data of science. William Paley’s celebrated book Natural Theology (1803) summarized its goal: to muster sufficient examples of beneficial adaptation in the natural world to prove, in the words of the later Bridgewater Treatises, the...
"Power, Wisdom and Goodness of God in the Works of Creation" (qtd. in Bowler 85).

After The Origin of Species power and wisdom of sorts are still evidenced by the world, but goodness is in very short supply. Charles Darwin, a reluctant revolutionary, was influenced by natural theology in his youth. He still attempted to interpret the book of nature in terms of purpose and design. But the inescapable conclusion of his own theory seems to be that the only purpose that stands out clearly from the confused scribbling of evolution is infliction of pain. Natural selection works by discarding millions of lives in order to achieve even a minor adaptation, and this winnowing out of the unfit is accompanied by relentless suffering. Paley’s famous metaphor for the beautifully designed, harmonious natural order was a watch. In the post-Darwinian world, a rack appears to be a better symbol. Darwin writes in 1856 to Joseph Hooker: “What a book a devil’s chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering, low, and horribly cruel works of nature!” (1990, 178). This devil’s book, a radical revision of Natural Theology, is jointly written by scientists, writers, and ideologues in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In 1888, T. H. Huxley, Wells’s teacher at the Normal School of Science, assesses natural theology’s “evidences of benevolence” and ironically asks: “But if so, why is it not equally proper to say of the equally numerous arrangements, the no less necessary result of which is the production of pain, that they are evidences of malevolence?” (196). Many fin de siècle intellectuals, especially biologists well versed in the vulnerabilities of the flesh, were inclined to agree. George Romanes, another famous scientist and man of letters, turns the findings of evolutionary theory into an indictment against the creator of nature.

For in the human mind the sense of right and wrong—with all its accompanying and constituting emotions of love, sympathy, justice, etc—is so important a factor, that however greatly we may imagine the intellectual side of the human mind to be extended, we can scarcely imagine that the moral side could ever become so apparently eclipsed as to end in the authorship of such a world as we find in terrestrial nature. Most of the instances of special design which are relied upon by the natural theologian to prove the intelligent nature of the First Cause, have as their end or object the infliction of painful death or the escape from remorseless enemies; and in so far as the argument in favour of the intelligent nature of the First Cause is an argument against its morality . . . it does appear that the scheme [of nature], if it is a scheme, is the product of a Mind which differs from the more highly evolved type of human mind in that it is immensely more intellectual without being nearly so moral. (76–79)
However, the very magnitude of suffering that evolutionary theory uncovers in Nature precludes mere condemnation. Pain on such a scale becomes dazzling, breathtaking, as sublime as the starry sky. Nature, as it emerges from Romanes's writings, may still be “horribly cruel,” but it is no longer “clumsy and low.”

In this covert admiration for the sheer scale of Nature’s brutality lie the seeds of “sacred science.” One possible philosophical attitude to Nature that followed from Darwinism was radical dissociation between the natural world and human civilization. This attitude, brilliantly expounded in T. H. Huxley’s seminal essay “Evolution and Ethics” (1894), claimed that the greatness of civilization lies in its being unnatural. Evolution cannot provide a guide to social conduct. We prove our humanity by challenging Nature with such artificial inventions as justice, mercy, and compassion. Huxley presciently saw where eugenics was heading and warned in no uncertain terms against the consequences of any human body investing itself with the “natural” authority to winnow out “the unfit.” H. G. Wells, Huxley’s student, was profoundly influenced by his teacher’s views, and this influence is clear in both The Time Machine (1895) and The Island of Dr. Moreau (1896). But Wells, as his subsequent utopian leanings clearly demonstrate, could not face being suspended in the void of human freedom, with no “symbolic authority” to guide us in the building of a better world. His very long career could be mapped out in terms of the conflict between his Huxleyan pessimism and his own attempts to reconstruct a meaningful nexus between Nature and history that eventually brought him into some unsavory political company. This ambivalence is already felt in The Island of Dr. Moreau, as we shall see. However, Wells, a biologist by training, remained constrained by the clear message of Darwinism that evolution is nonteleological. But in order to articulate his own version of “the religion of evolution,” George Bernard Shaw had to ditch Darwinism altogether. His long Introduction to Back to Methuselah is an astounding argument in favor of neo-Lamarckism on political grounds. If natural selection cannot underwrite utopia, natural selection has to go.

However, most post-Darwinian biologists chose a less radical path of trying to reconcile natural selection with some version of teleology. The scientific details of these fascinating developments, such as theories of orthogenesis, and various combinations of natural selection and some form of in-built evolutionary progressivism (or emphasis on mutations), are beside the point now. What science tried to do was to make Nature, as brutal and uncaring as it is, into a guide for human progress. And science’s ideological spin-offs, Social Darwinism and eugenics, magnified this trend by ascribing to Nature’s cruelty a positive moral value.
If evolution is seen as teleological and progressive, pain and suffering become ennobled by being tools of evolutionary transcendence. An early example of this attitude, which constitutes the emotional bedrock of Social Darwinism, is Winwood Reade’s *The Martyrdom of Man* (1872). The book is a sweeping survey of cosmic and human history as a ceaseless striving for progress governed by “a law which in itself is murderous and cruel” (406):

But it is when we open the Book of Nature, that book inscribed in blood and tears; it is when we study the laws regulating life, the laws productive of development—that we plainly see how illusive is this theory that God is Love. In all things there is cruel, profligate, and abandoned waste. Of all the animals that are born only a few can survive; and it is owing to this law that development takes place. The law of murder is the law of growth. Life is one long tragedy; creation is one great crime. (519)

Instead of indignation, however, this grim picture of a universal abattoir evokes admiration. Evolution, after all, is one inexorable rise to divinity. From the amoeba to the ape to the “savage” to the European, mankind “is becoming more and more noble, more and more divine, slowly rising towards perfection” (522). The way to see Nature’s cruelty as sublime is to shift the focus from the individual body writhing in agony to the collective body of humanity which, by virtue of its sheer enormity, overwhelms the senses and drowns sympathy and pity in the calm contemplation of evolution’s irresistible power. Thus the sublime body of eugenics is born—the body of the collective that subsumes and cancels out the pain of individual members, the body of the race, the “national organism,” that needs to be cured and purified— even, and in particular, at the price of its components’ suffering. The impervious, immortal body that the New Man wishes to don is constructed through the phantasmagoric self-identification with the “human whole,” which, of course, excludes those “cells” deemed cancerous, inferior, diseased.

The post-Darwinian inversion of benevolent natural theology into a gospel of cruelty paves the way for the sacred science of massacre. The chosen few may escape Darwin’s universal hecatomb by identifying both with the goal and with the methods of evolution. The sublime of violence is available to any murderer but only as a shattering and mute experience of limits. Incorporated into a political ideology and propped up by the authority of science, however, it becomes a tool of individual and collective transcendence, a dissecting knife wielded with a sense of righteousness by the priest of a new biology-based religion, “conscious of his ghastly mission, and proud of it” (Haldane 93).
THE TWO SURGEONS

In Lucius Shepard's short story "Mengele," the first-person narrator named Phelan crashes his plane in the Amazonian rainforest where he is saved by a scientist who brings him to the enclave populated by misshapen humanoid creatures, the product of the scientist's experiments. Phelan has a long confrontation with the scientist in the course of which the latter explains his motivations. Phelan attempts to kill the Doctor, fails, and ultimately succumbs to his grim philosophy. The scientist is Dr. Josef Mengele.

The plot of the story is identical to the plot of The Island of Dr. Moreau. This similarity is not accidental. Striking parallels between Dr. Moreau's vivisection and Nazi concentration camp science have been noted by writers and critics alike. Frank McConnell, for example, sees in Moreau's "chaste sadism . . . the origins of a peculiarly modern institution. The concentration camp is becoming possible" (92).

For McConnell, however, parallels between Moreau's island and Auschwitz are only vaguely conceptualized in terms of "sadism." My emphasis, on the contrary, is on the ideological continuity that accounts for their similarity. Dr. Moreau is one of the first portrayals of the New Man of eugenics who later evolves into the New Man of fascism. Both the island and the camp are factories of pain, manufacturing the sublime body, and neither can be understood outside the ideological rationale for its existence. The cruelty of Moreau and Mengele is not the cause but the effect of their involvement with "a peculiarly modern institution" of ideologically motivated torture.

H. G. Wells's novel is remarkably prescient in its analysis of the interaction between ideology and cruelty. Prendick, the first-person narrator, arrives on Moreau's private island after the shipwreck that has exposed the raw violence people are capable of in extreme situations. What he sees on the island first seems to him to be a continuation of his nightmare of primitive brutality: the misshapen and suffering Beast-Folk and the charnel house of Moreau's laboratory. His response is abhorrence and fear. The pain he witnesses causes him an almost physical distress but at the same time evokes an emotional empathy with the victims of Moreau's vivisection.

But after he meets Moreau and the latter has a chance to expound his philosophy, Prendick undergoes a complete about-face. He is enthralled, confused, and ultimately convinced. Their conversation centers precisely on the issue of pain, Prendick having just witnessed the ghastly spectacle of a cut-up bleeding body stretched on a rack. When Prendick indignantly asks Moreau: "Where is your justification for inflicting all this pain?" the latter gives a double answer, by turns disparaging pain and glorifying it, shifting from sober
physiological evaluation to sadomasochistic ecstasy: On the one hand: “Oh, but it [pain] is such a little thing. A mind truly opened to what science has to teach must see that it is a little thing. . . . Why, even on this earth, even among living things, what pain is there?” (106). On the other hand: “Each time I dip a living creature into the bath of burning pain, I say, This time I will burn out all the animal, this time I will make a rational creature of my own” (112).

Pain is both a “little thing,” accidental to the issue at hand, which is the transformation of animals into human beings, and at the same time, the mystical baptismal font, which is to effect this transformation. This is the double-speak of the scientific ideologue combining the striving for rationality with radical transgression. But what is even more unsettling is the effect this has on Prendick. Once the immediate danger to himself is over, he drifts around, passively soaking up Moreau’s philosophy. When he was personally threatened, his reaction was defiance, but the more secure he feels, the more he falls under Moreau’s spell.

When Prendick looks at Moreau at the close of their conversation, he sees not the madman or the criminal he expected to find but an iconic figure of wisdom, “a white-faced, white-haired man, with calm eyes. Save for his serenity, the touch almost of beauty that resulted from his set tranquility and from his magnificent build, he might have passed muster among a hundred other comfortable old gentlemen” (114). What is striking is the abstractness of this description, as if Prendick saw an ideal incarnated rather than the body of an individual. Similarly, Phelan in Shepard’s “Mengele” views Mengele as an embodiment of a general “Mengele principle.” And even the historical Mengele was enveloped in the mystique of generality, deliberately cultivating an image of himself as an “abstraction” rather than an individual human being (Lifton 380, quoting testimony of a survivor). In the eyes of those who come under his spell, Doctor Death is seen not as the perishable, irrevocably individual flesh but as the sublime body.

Wells’s great novel demonstrates exactly where the divinity of the torturer comes from. Power, even absolute power, is not enough: the sadistic camp guards evoked fear and revulsion but nothing like the equivocal admiration surrounding Doctor Death. What is necessary in order to produce a sublime body is a particular ideological interpretation of the power of violence.

Simply to torture, maim, and murder is only the beginning; one needs a symbolic authority that integrates violence into a comprehensive worldview. One needs a cause. For Moreau, as for all the subsequent New Men, the cause is the renaturalization of society. When Prendick asks Moreau “Why?” the latter replies: “The study of Nature makes a man at last as remorseless as Nature” (106–108). Moreau’s project, as he sees it, is based not on Faustian hubris but on obedience to natural law. Later Moreau offers a classic formulation of the
“Then I am a religious man, Prendick, as every sane man must be. It may be, I fancy, I have seen more of the ways of the world’s Maker than you—for I have sought His laws, in my way, all my life, while you, I understand, have been collecting butterflies...” (106).

One of the contemporary reviews of the book saw the author’s object as “parody[ing] the work of the Creator of the human race” (in Parrinder 56). McConnell also reads the novel in theological terms, with Moreau being “a post-Darwinian Christ” (97). And this is indeed how Moreau sees himself, regarding his butchery as imitatio dei. Not only is vivisection a path to the divine but it is the only true path. Pain is the gospel of “the world’s Maker,” while innocuous butterflies are just a gaudy screen, a diversion hiding God’s stern visage. Similarly, Shepard’s Mengele explains his activities in terms of a higher principle, except that in the post-Auschwitz world even he cannot call this principle anything other than evil: “Evil was not—as it had been depicted for centuries—the tool of chaos... [Evil] was simplicity, it was system, it was the severing stroke of a knife. And most of all, it was inevitable. The entropic resolution of good, the utter simplification of the creative. Hitler had always known it, and National Socialism had always embodied it” (281).

By identifying with “the world’s Maker,” the New Man becomes divine. Moreau is worshipped by his creatures whose litany of praise for their torturer is one of the most wrenching scenes in the book:

- H is is the House of Pain.
- H is is the H and that makes.
- H is is the H and that wounds.
- H is is the H and that heals. (85)

There are echoes of Shakespeare’s The Tempest in Wells’s depiction of the island ruled over by a near omnipotent magician-cum-scientist. But it is The Tempest for the age of ideology, in which the Calibans praise their Prospero rather than curse him. And yet the Beast-Folk ultimately rebel, goaded on by their unbearable suffering. They are, as Moreau never ceases to point out, not human enough, mere animal meat for the scientific Superman to practice his craft on. They are enslaved, not converted. Moreau’s true disciple is neither the brutish Speaker of the Law, whom his creator despises with the same frigid cruelty with which he despises all of his subjects, nor the drunken dissolute Montgomery, his human assistant, who feels furtive pity for the tortured animals. Moreau’s apostle is the intellectual Prendick, who at the beginning felt immeasurably superior to the bloody filth of the island: a gentleman in the colonial Heart of Darkness.
In the scene of reading Moreau's Law, Prendick, an outsider, joins in the chorus of the Beast-Folk. Having witnessed terrible violence, he is shocked and traumatized, and belief in Moreau's divinity offers the only possibility of reconstituting his shattered self. To cope with the violent sublime, he identifies with the sublime object of power rather than with its abject victims. His own liberal values exploded by what he witnesses on the island, Prendick eagerly grasps at Moreau's sacred science as the alternative system that can make sense of the dreadful senselessness of the Beast-Folk's suffering. Moreau's "divinity," first seen as an absurd imposture, soon becomes for him an article of faith. After the Doctor's death, he reimplies it upon the Beast-Folk. He claims this to be a matter of self-preservation, but it is not difficult to see in his contempt for Moreau's victims an acceptance of the vivisectionist's values. His only regret is that he is, after all, too weak to emulate Moreau's self-transcendence: "Had I kept my courage up to the level of the dawn, had I not allowed it to ebb away in solitary thought, I might have grasped the vacant spectre of Moreau, and ruled over the Beast People. As it was, I lost the opportunity, and sank to the position of a mere leader among my fellows" (170).

After his escape from the island, he transmutes the brutal shock of his experience into an epiphany, which allows him to view Moreau's House of Pain as part of the eternal order of Nature: "There it must be, I think, in the vast and eternal laws of matter, and not in daily cares and sins and troubles of men, that whatever is more than animal within us must find its solace and its hope" (192).

However, his lofty identification with the "vast and eternal laws of matter" is merely a rephrasing of Moreau's creed. Prendick strives to translate the sublime experience of the island into the language of concepts, and the result is his intellectual enslavement to Moreau. The despised Beast-Folk retain more independence, for they eventually kill their creator. If the House of Pain is meant to teach obedience, the only one to learn the lesson is Prendick whose body escapes Moreau's knife. The victims rebel; the witness becomes a collaborator.

An even starker description of the same process is given in Shepard's "Mengele." Phelan decides to kill Mengele but runs away when he finds out that Mengele has "transformed himself into a monster" (285), leaving his face old but rejuvenating his body. The horror of bodily mutilation first shocks him into surrender—"the sight of that shrunk face perched atop a youthful body was enough to shred the last of my rationality" (285)—and then opens him up to the acknowledgement of the inevitability of "Mengele's principle" (289). In his moment of epiphany, traumatized by the sight of yet another monstrous cripple, he realizes Mengele represents the supreme order of Nature and his
cruelty is merely a limited contribution to the inexorable cosmic process: “I
doubted his efforts were essential to that gray principle underlying the factory
air, the principle he worshipped, whose high priest he was. He had been right.
Good was eroding into evil, bright into dark, abundance into uniformity” (288).

For both Phelan and Prendick the power of Doctor Death becomes as irre-
sistible, as self-evident, and finally as amoral as the power of Nature and just
as little to be resented or rebelled against. Prendick moves from the sublime
power of power and pain to the calm, disinterested, elevating sublime of vastness and
infinity. He now contemplates Moreau’s charnel house as if it were a distant
star. He accepts Moreau’s “tranquility” at face value, as the serene indifference
of Nature. In doing so, he, as much as Phelan who gives up his search for
Mengele, becomes an accomplice to atrocity.

Prendick’s narrative itself can be seen as an attempt to overcome the trau-
ma of the sublime experience, to translate it into language, to say the
unsayable. But what he ends up saying has been determined by Moreau. The
whole aimless project of vivisection becomes a sort of macabre teaching
device. The glimpse of a wounded creature “bound painfully upon a frame-
work, scarred, red, and bandaged” (73), initially served as a visual shock to
shatter the defenses of the symbolic order. By the end of Prendick’s education
in the pain of the Other, a new symbolic order has been erected on the ruins
of the old one and the tortured body has become its transcendental signifier.

Moreau’s subjectivity has been shaped by the new Law, which bestows
upon him the sublime immunity from pain and pleasure: “Pain! Pain and
pleasure— they are for us only as long as we wriggle in the dust . . .” (107).
And to prove to Prendick that he has indeed reached the evolutionary stage
of the “man of steel,” Moreau unflinchingly sticks a penknife into his own
thigh. This masochistic gesture draws attention to his own corporeality and at
the same time disavows it. He is body, true, but a body invulnerable to pain,
impervious to agony, perfect and immortal, the body of the “One Man,” the
future goal of evolution: “Then with men, the more intelligent they become
the more intelligently they will see after their own welfare, and the less they
will need the goad [of pain] to keep them out of danger” (106-7).

What drives Moreau’s quest for the sublime body is the fear and revulsion
toward the real flesh polluted by what he calls “the mark of the beast.” He is
an ascetic of sadomasochism whose only pleasure, he claims, is “the strange
colourless delight of . . . intellectual desires” (107). He seeks numbness by
making the Beast-Folk writhe in torment; transcends the body by violating it;
and purifies himself by exposing the unsightly mess of blood and viscera in his
victims. Moreau’s ideal is the body without sensation and without interiority,
the steely carapace, which later becomes forged into the armor of the soldier
male.
It has been argued that Moreau is a new Frankenstein, and his insensitivity is the result of blind pursuit of knowledge. But, in fact, Moreau is uninterested in knowledge or rather, like Mengele, he uses procedures of scientific inquiry as an alibi for his own self-fashioning. On his deathbed, Frankenstein talks with enthusiasm about the possible application of science, but when Prendick asks Moreau what possible practical results he could hope to achieve, since “The only thing that could excuse vivisection to me would be some application…” Moreau dismisses him with a contemptuous “You are a materialist” (105). Unlike other famous vivisectionists, such as Claude Bernard, Moreau has no practical goal in sight. Instead, he pursues the intangible “something” which seems to be forever eluding his grasp: “something in everything I do that defeats me, makes me dissatisfied, challenges me to further efforts” (112). Thus, his surgery becomes autotelic, pain for pain’s sake. His aimless creation of “thing[s] of pain and fear” (108) is caught in a circular logic: Moreau’s cruelty is justified by the cruelty of Nature, which is demonstrated by the cruelty of Moreau.

It is precisely in their ritual character that Moreau’s experiments differ from Frankenstein’s. Frankenstein belongs to a different ideological configuration altogether, and any attempt to construct a unified genealogy of the “mad scientist” overlooks a sharp break brought about by Darwinism and the emergence of bio-ideologies. Frankenstein is a solitary Romantic hero, who becomes obsessed with his creation; their relationship is essentially psychological, a trope for the split psyche, the divided soul. Moreau, churning out monsters on an almost industrial basis, is brutally indifferent to the Beast-Folk, enslaving them with a kind of absentminded efficiency that eerily prefigures Mengele’s “detached, haughty air” and “his frigid cruelty” (Lifton 345, quoting testimony of a survivor). It is their bodies that interest him, not their souls, which he dismisses as the primitive “souls of beasts” (113). He needs the anonymous suffering flesh in order to recreate himself in the image of cruel and sublime Nature. The Beast-Folk are simply reservoirs of pain which Moreau uses to elevate himself from the plane of the merely individual to the cosmic level of “One Man.” The new self he fashions for himself is the very antithesis of Frankenstein’s split psyche: it is unified, impermeable, supreme.

However, Wells’s and Mary Shelley’s novels do share one significant feature: both are records of failure. Even though Moreau leaves behind an ambivalent disciple in Prendick, his own project collapses. The Beast-Folk ultimately revolt, kill their deified torturer, and then revert to animality. Moreau himself foresees the “return of the beast”: “And they revert. As soon as my hand is taken from them the beast begins to creep back, begins to assert itself again…” (113).
The resistance of the Beast-Folk is unconscious, almost like the physiological process of healing, the stubborn flesh broken and rearranged by Moreau's scalpel growing back into its former shape. Frankenstein's monster rebels, goaded by injustice; the Beast-Folk are unaware of such abstract concepts. Their revolt is the revolt of the body.

And yet it is precisely the corporeality of their resistance that offers the only bulwark against the rapacity of the biological sublime. As Prendick's and Phelan's surrenders demonstrate, moral ideals are too fragile to withstand the onslaught of "sacred science." But since his search for the sublime body is inescapably tied to the real flesh, Moreau's project refuses to dissolve in the rarefied reaches of the mathematical sublime. The sublime body is haunted by the sentient body, the body of pleasure and pain. For Moreau such corporeality is bestial, for only the steely armor of the New Man deserves the name of humanity: "As long as visible or audible pain turns you sick, as long as your own pains drive you, so long as pain underlies your propositions about sin, so long, I tell you, you are an animal, thinking a little less obscurely what an animal feels" (105).

The novel, however, compellingly shows that no humanity is possible without the "mark of the beast." The Beast-Folk's transformations, from animality to humanity and back again, graphically demonstrate the unbroken continuity between the human and animal estates. It is the very animality of the Beast-Folk that makes them human: "seeing the creature there in a perfectly animal attitude, with the light gleaming in his eyes, and its imperfectly human face distorted with terror, I realized again the fact of its humanity" (136).

In two parallel chapters entitled "The Crying of the Puma" and "The Crying of the Man," Prendick hears the sounds of pain which he first takes for animal ululation and then for the articulate sobbing of a human being. But it is the same pain and the same voice. This continuity of anguish undermines Moreau's dream of escaping the beastly flesh.

Pain expresses the kinship of all living things that Moreau attempts to transcend by inflicting pain. Such a paradox is negotiable only by a strict separation between the ordinary bodies of man-animals that feel pain and the sublime body of the "One Man" that does not. In Moreau's project, the pain of the victims is read as proof of their inhumanity, while the superior humanity of the surgeon-priest rests on his exemption from suffering. Pain becomes a just punishment for the ability to feel pain. Similarly, the scars and mutilations of the vivisection function as an after-the-fact legitimization for inflicting them, for nobody so ugly could possibly deserve any better. Moreau's surgery is meant not to reconfigure his victims into a human shape but to disfigure them, creating the grotesque hybrids of the Ape Man, the Dog Man,
the Hairy Gray Thing whose ugliness appalls Prendick. It is clear that the “plasticity” of living forms, Moreau’s ostensible subject, does not require the imposition of human likeness onto such unsuitable subjects as sheep, pumas, and llamas. Prendick calls his choice of the human form “a strange wickedness” (105), but there is nothing strange about it in terms of Moreau’s ideological needs. The Beast-Men are made to look deformed, so their humanity will be seen as tainted, while Moreau’s superiority is established by his “touch of beauty.” This is the aesthetics of the concentration camp in which the dehumanization of prisoners served to support the original biodiscourse “which made it possible to exclude a group of people from within the borders of the human race” (Biagioli 201).

But such exclusion is sustainable only until the New Man’s sublime body is revealed as the ideological phantom it is by the irrefutable fact of mortality. Moreau’s exalted corpus turns into ordinary carrion, just as bloody and disgusting as the bodies of vivisected animals, its head “battered in by the fetters of the puma” (151). Pain creates the fiction of power but it can also dispel it by acting as “the sign of a radically new and wholly secular truth: the truth of the material body” (David Morris 233). This “secular truth” belies the sacred science of pain and the fantasies of evolutionary transcendence predicated on the repression of the New Man’s own corporeality. The torturer must keep himself pure from imputations of being like the tortured; otherwise, pain spreads across the sterile edge of the scalpel and corrodes power rather than creates it. Moreau’s own body becomes both the incarnation of the biological sublime and the arena of its defeat.

Moreau wages a losing battle against the stubborn physicality of the body, the persistence of pleasure and pain that drags his creatures down the evolutionary gradient, back into the morass of beasthood: “First one animal trait, than another, creeps to the surface and stares out at me . . .” (112). While the Beast-Folk’s minds are molded by Moreau’s religion, their bodies unconsciously resist his Law. Individual bodies, with their own irreducible dynamics of pain and pleasure, reject their allotted role as empty vehicles for fantasies of the biological sublime. Insofar as such fantasies always require the body, they are always defeated by their own dependence on it.

DEAD RINGERS

In Ira Levin’s The Boys from Brazil (1976), Mengele (who was, in fact, still alive when the book was published) puts his twins experiments in Auschwitz to good use. Twenty years before Dolly, the cloned sheep, he produces ninety-four cloned Hitlers. The action of the novel, a taut and well-plotted thriller, centers on his plan to kill the adoptive fathers of the boys when they reach
fourteen, so as to create the right psychological conditions for the maturation of the Fuhrer, whose tyrannical father died when young Adolf was that age. Mengele is eventually foiled by Yakov Liebermann, a Nazi hunter, but the boys remain at large.

Identical twins are natural clones and Mengele's well-documented obsession with them, which led him to "collect" twins from the incoming transports, might have been based on some project to increase Aryan fertility. But twins are also monsters in the purely biological, nonjudgmental sense. In human beings twin births are, by definition, rare and abnormal—monstrous. In her Introduction to a book about twins, Penelope Farmer, a twin herself, writes: "my researches as well as my experience have led me to think more and more that we twins really are in some respects wholly peculiar, other, beasts" (7). Levin's Mengele, thus, is both the would-be father of a new world, the hopeful demiurge of the once and future Reich, and the creator of monsters.

In Levin's book, one of the first contributions to the present upsurge in Nazi pop-mythology, the historical relationship between Hitler and Mengele is inverted to produce a new archetype. The Angel of Death was, after all, just one of the many physicians in Auschwitz, not a member of the Nazi political elite, and hardly somebody to be on intimate terms with the Fuhrer. But the dross of history is discarded in favor of the tinsel of legend. Mengele, his dreadful aura maintained in the collective imagination by the stories of his atrocities, eclipses the Goerings and the Speers as Hitler's second-in-line, his chosen henchman, his most loyal servant. But even this is not enough and Mengele—many years younger than the historical Hitler—becomes the Fuhrer's father and creator. This is why Levin's character constantly stresses that he has personally delivered the boys from Brazil. In the timelessness of the cultural unconscious, Moreau and Mengele coalesce into one sinister figure, Doctor Death, who gives birth to the monstrous kingdom of pain. While the real Mengele is a forgotten exile in South America, Levin's Mengele has an army of assassins at his beck and call. One of them is perturbed by his strange assignment but quickly gives in—the doctor knows best:

Farnbach shrugged and looked at his sheet again.
"You're... the doctor", he said.
"So I am," the man in white said, still smiling as he turned to his briefcase. (25)

Not just a doctor, but the doctor, the "man in white," Mengele with his clones is the most potent image of the deadly New Man, doubly threatening because he seems to link the archaic mystique of the Third Reich with the futuristic
dangers of biotechnology. The demonic energies of Hitler can only be released through his monstrous midwifery.

But Levin's book ends on a paradoxical note. Mengele is killed not by his nemesis, the camp survivor Liebermann, but by one of the cloned Adolfs who sets his Dobermans upon the doctor after having been told of his own genesis. Is this a sign of the radical innocence of postmodernity born in the bloody travails of World War II, or of its radical entanglement with the New Man's historical crimes?

Twin research is central to the scientific adjudication of the rival claims of heredity and environment. The old conundrum of nature versus nurture is now revived by the stunning successes of the human genome project. Data on identical twins are used to buttress claims about the hereditability of various psychological and physical traits (and the same data, suitably reinterpreted, are cited in support of the environmental argument). The Boys from Brazil is positioned in the focus of this debate, yet manages to evade taking a definite position. Levin seems to want to have his cake and eat it too. A Hitler child dispatches Mengele, thus proclaiming his independence from the dark genome of history. But the very cold-bloodedness with which he murders his creator has something chilling in it, a premonition of future atrocities. And even more ominously, the novel ends with another clone imagining himself as a crowd-commanding demagogue.

Liebermann destroys the list of Hitler clones to prevent a radical Jewish organization from killing them. His decision is moral since they are, after all, only children. He believes in the primacy of the environment: growing up in a better milieu, these children will overcome Mengele's heritage. But the novel itself seems to be skeptical about his optimism, and in the twenty-five years since its publication, the hereditary view of human nature has grown much stronger. Hitler reborn becomes a figure for the rebirth of the bio-ideologies that inspired the Nazi genocide. If Mengele is just a deluded lunatic, he is frightening but also pathetic: an obsessive snubbed by his former comrades, as he appears in some scenes in Levin's novel. But if he is right, if even one of the boys becomes a simulacrum of the Fuhrer, Nazi eugenics is vindicated, and Mengele is a prophet, the omnipotent "doctor," presiding at the birth of the Ubermensch.

Created and recreated by Mengele, Hitler becomes both the ultimate New Man and the ultimate monster. The Immaculate Conception of cloning cleanses him from the last taint of corporeal vulnerability. When the Hitler child asks Mengele who his parents were, the latter triumphantly replies: "You have none!" (243). Mengele longs to be "blessed" by this budding Antichrist, whose future Aryan empire he describes in the language of the Apocalypse. But at the same time, like Moreau's Beast-Folk, the cloned
Hitlers are Mengele's creatures, called into being without consideration for their own needs and desires. And like Moreau, Levin's Mengele is torn apart when his creatures rebel.

Looking at his mangled corpse, the white of bone, the red of blood, Liebermann feels profound satisfaction that the Angel of Death has been reduced to carrion. So far, at least, the lessons of history have been efficacious: the glamour of Doctor Death is not what it used to be. However, Mengele's children are alive and well. One of them is drawing a spellbound crowd and the TV cameras focus on the face of the speaker, "someone fantastic, a really good person that they loved and respected" (268), someone who could change people's lives, inspire them, reshape them in his own image, a real New Man.